

## STATE OF THE CITY

Celebrations, stadiums, and stores. Submarines and ships. Trolleys and tournaments. Parks and museums. Such were the dreams and realities of North Little Rock in 2004.

For many reasons, the past year was a very important one in our history. However, one event took precedent because it was a celebration of our history. Our Centennial Celebration was indeed "The Party of the Century." For two days, citizens and visitors alike enjoyed food, dance, music, arts, crafts, stories, skits, poetry, prayer, and each other on our revitalized Main Street. Reminiscing was the realm of the day as friends and neighbors shared stories and rekindled memories of days gone by. However, there was a great deal of positive discussion about our city's present and future among the more than 25,000 attendees. To commemorate the event, the westside of downtown's Faucette Park was transformed into a Centennial Garden. Also, "On the Opposite Shore: The Making of North Little Rock" a comprehensive and informative book about the city's history, was prepared and published by the North Little Rock Historic Commission. Although this was a party for the days past, I truly believe it was also a harbinger of downtown festivals, celebrations and growth to come.

Downtown excitement was not limited to the Centennial Celebration. It is easy to be enthused about all that is happening in the place where the city

began. Our streetscape project was extended on Main Street from 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Street. Work on the section between Broadway and 8<sup>th</sup> Streets was initiated.

Another downtown project became a reality when, after 8 years of planning and building, the RiverRail Trolley System began operation in November. Headquartered and housed in North Little Rock, this \$19.5 million project was opened in time for another once in a lifetime ceremony, the grand opening of the Clinton Presidential Center in downtown Little Rock. Locals, joined by visitors from across the nation and the world, enjoyed riding impressive trolley cars in numbers that exceeded expectations. Although, our metropolitan area is the smallest to enjoy an operating streetcar system, ridership has done better than anticipated. During its initial operation period of November and December, the RiverRail Trolley boarded 43,000 passengers averaging 750 per day. Both numbers exceeded expectations.

Soon, two additional streetcars will be added. A \$9.2 million expansion of the 2.5 mile system is planned and should be finished by the end of 2005. Phase Two will connect the Clinton Presidential Center and Heifer Project International headquarters and Global Village to the existing system. A plan for Phase Three, which will be built in North Little Rock, has not been finalized.

The Central Arkansas Transit Authority experienced other successes throughout 2004. Bus routes were extended to the burgeoning East McCain retail area where their buses now transport both shoppers and workers. Also, 40 attractive and functional new metal bus shelters were installed on routes

throughout the city. I anticipate an even more successful 2005 for CATA. We look forward to planning Phase Three of an expanding RiverRail Trolley system.

One of the main reasons that a plan for Phase Three of the RiverRail Trolley System has not been finalized, is the unprecedented downtown development opportunities that will impact the system. Last fall, after months of work by consultants, city officials, citizens and developers, the North Little Rock Waterfront Development Plan was published and submitted for public consumption. To say it generated interest and action would be the understatement of 2004. It is a comprehensive, optimistic and dramatic plan for the future of our downtown. It is set in a context that complements Little Rock's downtown as both cities work to make them exciting places to live and work. Both downtowns are emphasizing community and opportunity, while featuring fun, form and function. I have little doubt, that soon our downtowns will be equal or superior to those found in any mid-sized and most large metropolitan regions.

The response from potential developers and investors to what has been done, what is planned to be done and what can be done has been remarkable. For example, a six to seven story mixed-use development project across from City Hall at the corner of Main and Broadway is moving forward. The long abandoned Owens Funeral Home is being beautifully renovated in a historically sensitive fashion. Thanks to our innovative C-6 zoning regulation, both buildings will house a dynamic mix of residential, retail and office space.

Finally, the North Little Rock Chamber of Commerce made a downtown commitment several years ago when it relocated to Main Street. In 2004, the Chamber strengthened that commitment when it purchased and remodeled a former pawnshop at 100 Main Street. After investing more than \$1.3 million, the Chamber now has a permanent home with beautiful offices, a large boardroom and a conference center capable of hosting events for nearly 300 attendees. Like city government, the Chamber of Commerce has made a positive statement about our downtown and its future.

The waterfront planning process provided the impetus that could make another dream a reality. Toward the end of the year, discussions were taking place among the possible site owners, potential operators and users concerning the feasibility of a North Little Rock professional baseball stadium.

The area under consideration includes privately and publicly owned property on both sides of the Broadway Bridge, north of Riverfront Drive. A public/private venture to develop commercial projects on the land adjacent to an \$18-24 million baseball stadium is being contemplated. The positive impact of such a public/private development may be impossible to measure, but it would undeniably provide a huge stimulus to move the downtown visualized in the Waterfront Development Plan closer to reality. I suggest reserving your stadium seats and suites soon.

Another multi-year effort that will have a positive effect on downtown development was the arrival of the Razorback submarine. While traveling from

its former home in the nation of Turkey to its new home in the City of North Little Rock, the Razorback was welcomed with celebrations in New Orleans and North Little Rock. On a unbelievably beautiful summer day, more than 10,000 people come to Northshore Park along the Arkansas River, to welcome the Razorback's return to the United States. Balloons, banners, speeches, music and fireworks contributed to the festive atmosphere. Prominent among the crowd and on the submarine were numerous submariners, many of whom served on the ship. Again, this homecoming celebration was not an end, but a beginning; an initial step toward realizing another dream for downtown, the building of an Inland Maritime Museum. Last year the U.S. Department of the Navy helped us realize that dream when it awarded its tugboat Hoga to the city. Now, we are proud owners of one ship that was at the beginning of World War II in the Pacific Ocean, (the Hoga desperately fought fires in the attack on Pearl Harbor), as well as, the end of World War II in the Pacific Ocean, (the Razorback was in Tokyo Bay for the surrender of Japan). Surely, creating a museum that highlighted these two events and these two ships, as well as, the history of the men and ships that fought battles, protected our shores, rescued people, delivered imports and distributed exports is a worthy dream that should and can become a reality.

For the second year, that very same Northshore Park co-hosted the largest festival in the state, Riverfest. Again, more than 250,000 people enjoyed the Memorial Day weekend festivities.

Two other record-breaking celebrations were held in North Little Rock last year. The celebration of high school basketball we know as the overall State Basketball Tournament, for the first time, was held at the Alltel Arena. For the second straight time, the State AAAAA Championship was held at North Little Rock High School's new auditorium affectionately dubbed "Smalltell Arena." Both tournaments set new attendance and revenue records. The overall State Tournament attendance of more than 68,000 blew away the previous record by almost 13,000 fans. Of course, it did not hurt that one of the State AAAAA Tournament finalists was our own North Little Rock High School Charging Wildcats. We look forward to at least two more years of state high school basketball tournament success at Alltel Arena. Overall, Alltel Arena had another successful year and continued making significant contributions to both the economic development and quality of life in central Arkansas. Again, the arena operated profitably bringing in nearly \$6 million with \$187,500 more in revenue than expenses. By the end of the year, more than 2 million people have attended events in the five years it has been open. The arena ranked 15<sup>th</sup> among U.S. arenas in ticket sales in 2004.

Another museum dream came closer to reality as planning and fundraising for the Arkansas Sports Hall of Fame progressed. Early in the year, the Hall of Fame announced that it would relocate the proposed 14,000 square foot Hall to the westside of Alltel Arena where it will be more noticeable and accessible to the public. Plans are for a state of the art, high tech, highly

interactive, fan friendly facility that properly and innovatively honors great Arkansas athletes.

Progress continued to be made on the Millennium Trail system. Construction of a trail climbing to Fort Roots began while a bike trail around Campbell Lake was completed. Importantly, the U.S. Corps of Engineers awarded a contract for the construction of a bikeway/walkway across the Murray Lock and Dam. The \$11 million project that will connect river trails in Little Rock and North Little Rock should be completed within two years.

In 2004, the Millennium Trail served as more than just a high quality recreation attraction; it became an economic development tool. One of the main reasons that Orbea USA, LLC located on the edge of downtown was the proximity of an empty building to the trail. That building is now home to people working at the national distribution center for Orbea's high-end bicycles.

With that in mind, can a skateboard distribution center be far off? About half of our \$500 thousand new skateboard park has been built. It was relocated from a cramped space between two buildings on Main Street to a beautiful site in Burns Park along the Arkansas River. In its former home, it was a small wooden facility. At its new home, the park will feature 24,000 square foot concrete bowl with walls, stairs, rails and trick boxes. While it may not attract a skateboard distribution center, this well planned state of the art skateboard facility, built by a nationally recognized skateboard park design and build firm, will attract skateboarders from near and far.

One has to be impressed with and enthused about the developments and progress made along our waterfront and in our downtown. However, I can say with confidence that "the best is yet to come."

In addition to the waterfront trail and skateboard park, other forms of recreation activities and investments had high priority across the city. Our tennis program, in the first full year to be managed by the Arkansas Tennis Association, has gone from a revenue user to a revenue producer. Enough funds have been generated to repair, maintain and resurface the original six courts. A change in emphasis from providing individual lessons to promoting tournaments and leagues was the primary factor behind the revenue increase. In order to accommodate more successful tournaments like the 12 year old national tournament held at Burns Park in August, seventeen new tennis courts were built. The Burns Park Tennis Center has become one of the premier tennis facilities in the region, if not the nation.

Up the road from the Tennis Center is the completely rebuilt Vince De Salvo Baseball Stadium. The new stands provide covered seating for more than 700 fans with a modern press box and concession area that puts out award winning food. The North Little Rock High School baseball team made good use of the facility on its way to becoming 2004 Class AAAAA State Champions.

Across town at the Rose City Recreation Center, now operated by the North Little Rock Boys and Girls Club, after school and summer programs were filled to capacity. The Police Athletic League has returned organized youth



baseball to Rose City. The program more than doubled in size as nineteen teams participated last season. PAL added a fall football program. Several PAL baseball players played on the city's 15 and younger baseball team, which along with a girls track team, participated in the International Children's Olympics in Cleveland, Ohio. In addition to having a once in a lifetime opportunity to meet and compete with players from across the world, the baseball team came home with the Bronze Metal. Be assured that it was not only young people that benefited from this emphasis on recreation; the Patrick Henry Hays Senior Citizens Center surpassed the 8,000 member mark. While the center's exercise pool, indoor track, and fitness equipment make for a healthy body, the games and educational programs make for a healthy mind. Two more important records were set at the center. Center income surpassed \$275,000 while volunteer hours exceeded 15,000. Adults were not the only volunteers contributing their time and talent, members of the Mayor's Youth Council gave more than 8,800 hours of service to their hometown.

Attendance and participation records were not confined to the Senior Citizens Center. The nearby and recently remodeled Laman Library hosted the greatest number of visitors in its history. Interesting speakers and musicians provided information and entertainment throughout the year. Another significant accomplishment was the preparation of a landscape plan for the city property bordered by the Laman Library, the Community Center and Pershing Avenue. The plan will become a reality this year.

Public safety maintained high priority status throughout the year. The Fire Department received over \$400,000 in grant monies, which allowed for the acquisition of a mobile fire safety house. This portable structure uses simulation to train young people about fire and severe weather survival. In addition, training videos and 500 smoke detectors were acquired. A Homeland Security grant funded the purchase of a mobile command center. It is a modified recreational vehicle used by police/fire/emergency services at major events, planned and unplanned. It is the first of its kind in Arkansas and played an important role throughout the weeklong Clinton Presidential Center opening ceremonies. This 911 center on wheels is available for use by other Pulaski County governments. In July, the Emergency Services Department installed a technology that allows dispatchers to pinpoint cellular phone call locations by a geographical positioning system.

The Police Department continued to operate the only Community Oriented Patrol Division in Arkansas. Another "one and only" is the Special Investigations Unit internet safety program which concentrates on apprehending child predators in our city, region and state.

Although reported crimes rose by 3 percent, North Little Rock enjoys a 38 percent lower crime rate for the combined cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock. A collaborative effort among the City Attorney's Office, Code Enforcement and Police Departments known as SAFE (Support, Abatement, Fines and Enforcement) had a significant impact on improving our quality of life

and public health. SAFE targeted 70 houses as public nuisances. After the condemnation process was initiated, 12 houses were demolished by the City, 50 were demolished and 8 were completely rehabilitated by the owners. The SAFE Team identified several illegal boarding houses operating in our city. After citations were issued and civil lawsuits filed, no more illegal boarding houses were reported or discovered.

Operation Focus concentrated on an area east of Pike Avenue between 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Streets. The project was our response to an increase in inoperable cars, trash, junk and debris in the area. Code officers passed out notices door to door asking for residents' involvement and cooperation in the clean up effort. Owners and residents voluntarily removed numerous abandoned and inoperable cars along with much trash and debris. Those that chose not to participate or refused to comply were issued citations for a court appearance.

Innovative initiatives like these will keep our city safe and retain our reputation as a public safety role model for other local governments.

The City Attorney's office enjoyed a multi-million dollar victory by successfully arguing for the Pulaski County use tax before the Arkansas Supreme Court. That office took the lead in persuading the Court that the use tax was legally adopted and that it applied to out of state purchases. More than \$6 million of escrowed use taxes were made available to Pulaski County jurisdictions.

After many years of stagnation, housing construction increased as 91 permits for single-family residential unit construction were issued. Included in the more than \$27 million worth of commercial construction was the new Glazer Distribution Center in eastern North Little Rock along the Old England Highway. This 150,000 square foot state of the art distribution center will bring more than 140 jobs to the city. The Economic Development Corporation enjoyed another success when its collaboration with the City and the Chamber of Commerce attained the Arkansas Community of Excellence designation from the Arkansas Department of Economic Development. This designation lets business owners and decision-makers, site selection consultants, as well as, state and federal agencies know that North Little Rock is prepared and ready for new and expanding businesses. This multi-year effort culminated in a City Hall ceremony at which Governor Mike Huckabee awarded the ACE Certificate to North Little Rock. The North Little Rock Economic Development Corporation is integrally involved with the new 11 county regional economic development and marketing organization now known as the Metro Little Rock Alliance. In October, the Alliance unveiled a regional economic development plan that will be used to guide Central Arkansas economic development actions for years to come.

While the dream of the 100 acre lifestyle shopping center at the intersection of Interstate 30 and 40 moved closer to becoming a reality, a Wal Mart Supercenter, Best Buy and Barnes and Noble Bookstore become realities

last year. All adding to the job market, economic vitality and retail variety of what is undoubtedly the “Shopping Center of Arkansas” – North Little Rock.

As evidenced by this report on the State of the City, 2004 was year of accomplishments, achievements and progress. I believe it will be remembered as a year of transition from the old North Little Rock that we honor and preserve, to the new North Little Rock where the dream of creating a vibrant, exciting place to live, work and play is, indeed, becoming a reality.